

# **A Study On Secondary School Students' Perceptions Of Their Motivation And Attitude Towards Learning The English Literature Component**

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**Abstract :** This study was carried out to investigate the secondary school students' perceptions of their motivations and attitudes towards the learning of English literature component of the KBSM syllabus. A total of sixty female Form Four students were selected based on convenient sampling as the respondents of the study. A set of questionnaire was designed to gain primary data from the respondents on their motivations and attitudes towards the learning of English literature component. The overall findings of the study indicates that the students are highly instrumentally oriented and intrinsically motivated to learn the English literature component although they do possess some extent of integrative orientation as well as low level of extrinsic motivation. Apart from that, the findings also show that the students possess quite favourable attitudes towards learning the English literature component. They are willing to take necessary actions to ensure their success in learning literature as well as acquiring the language. In conclusion, some recommendations have been made to further increase students' motivations and attitudes towards learning the English literature component and recommendations for future research have also been included in the final part of the report.

**Keyword :** motivation and attitude, learning the English literature component

## **Introduction**

In the era of information and technology, there is a great need for individuals to master the English language for communication purposes. Kitao (1996) states that English is used for different purposes such as news and information, business, diplomacy, entertainment and others. The English language has become a basic requirement for students and job seekers in this increasingly globalised world. In order to meet the needs for international communication, Malaysians need to be proficient in English.

In Malaysia, English is taught as a second language in schools. This shows that it is an essential language to be learnt as the mastery of English is not only viewed as a sign of one's intellectual development but also as a means by which the student responds to his experiences through improved thinking and communication skills. This means that the acquisition of English could contribute to the knowledge, understanding and skills of students, who need to be equipped with such skills in order to be prepared for more complex problems in the future (Rosli Talif, 1995).

The literature component of the *Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah* (KBSM) syllabus for Form 1 to 5 aims to enable learners to engage in a wider reading of good works and for enjoyment and self-development. It is also aimed to develop an understanding of other societies, cultures, values and traditions that will contribute to their emotional and spiritual growth (Sukatan Pelajaran Bahasa Inggeris KBSM, 2000). Literary texts are chosen because it provides cultural, linguistic and educational values (Sage, 1987). It is hoped that apart from improving students' mastery of the language, they will also be more culturally and socially adept.

Based on researches conducted, it is clear that the level of motivation that students have shape their attitudes to become either positive or negative towards learning a second language. As literature is one of the best mediums to expose second language learners to a variety of language input using authentic materials, it is essential that teachers realize the level of motivations and attitudes of students towards learning it.

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Literature has a lot to offer ESL and EFL learners. According to Hill (1986), the study of literature begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The psychological and linguistic reasons for teaching literature are: (1) the possibility of internalizing the language and reinforcing points previously learned, (2) a genuine language context and a focal point for the students in their own effort to communicate, (3) the motivation and (4) an introduction to the many different varieties and a range of texts of English (Hill, 1986). Due to these reasons, the Ministry of Education has included the literature component in the English language syllabus.

In second language learning, it is important that students have high motivation and positive attitude towards the target language. This is because many linguists have proven that motivation and attitude are closely related in determining the success of second language learning (Gardner and Lambert, 1972). Higher levels of motivation and positive attitude will produce more successful second language learners and vice versa. Brown (2000) states that positive attitudes towards the self, the native language and the target language group enhance second language proficiency. He further states that a second language learner benefits from positive attitude and that negative attitude may lead to decrease in motivation, input and interaction, hence, lead to unsuccessful attainment of proficiency.

Nonetheless, many students are not motivated in reading (Rosli Talif, 1995), hence, to them literature is burdening. As a result, they felt that they are forced to learn the subject and so, they learn the subject just to pass the examination (Pillay, 1998). Many students especially in the rural areas are facing difficulties in learning literature due to the language and cultural barrier (Hill, 1986). Due to their inability to comprehend the texts, they are not able to proceed to more cognitively challenging activities. They become passive listeners as they expect teachers to be the active provider of input during the learning process. Consequently, this leads them to frustration and building of negative attitude towards literature, while the process of learning itself will be demotivating (Hill, 1986).

At present, the issue is whether students are interested in learning English literature. The questions that have always been pondered upon are how much literature and reading texts should be included into the curriculum as well as the cultural and linguistic barriers that must be overcome to facilitate a successful second language learning environment. While other studies had been conducted to find out students' motivation and attitude towards second language learning, this study looked into students' perceptions of their motivation and attitude towards learning the English literature component of the KBSM syllabus in schools.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The objectives of this study are:

1. To find out students' perceptions towards the learning of the literature component in the English language syllabus.
2. To find out students' motivations towards the learning of the literature component in the English language syllabus.

3. To examine students' attitudes towards the learning of the literature component in the English language syllabus.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY**

High motivation and positive attitude that ESL students have contribute to their success in learning a second language. As literature is a rich linguistic material, it is beneficial to be used as a resource of comprehensible input in the language classrooms.

Thus, the findings of this study provide insights for English teachers who are teaching the literature component to reflect on whether the approaches that they are implementing in their classrooms are effective and beneficial to their students. Apart from that, teachers will be able to understand their students' perceptions, motivations and attitudes towards learning literature. By knowing these, teachers will be able to select a more appropriate method or technique to teach literature in order to make it interesting and fun for the students.

Furthermore, the findings of this study provide information for curriculum developers as to whether the reading materials of the literature component in the syllabus are motivating for the students and whether it caters to the students' needs, and interests. With this information, better selection of components for the English literature such as poems, short stories and novels could be done to make the students avid readers of the English literature.

Thus, it is hoped that through the findings of this study, teachers are able to cater to the students' needs and interests in learning the English literature component so as to improve on their motivation and shape their attitude positively as these will effect their success in second language learning.

### **RESEARCH INSTRUMENT**

This research utilized the quantitative research methodology. The instrument that was used to collect data was questionnaire. The questionnaire was adapted from two previous studies on using literature in the language classrooms by Said Ali (1991) and Baizura Hasni (2006).

The questionnaire consisted of sixty-three questions and was divided into three sections.  
A : Respondents' Demographic Information B : Students' general perceptions on learning the English literature component of the KBSM English language syllabus C : Students' motivations and attitudes towards the learning of the English literature component of the KBSM English language syllabus.

(A) : Opinions and feelings about your English literature lessons

(B) : Attitude

C (i) : Motivation I

C (ii) : Motivation II

Three types of questions were used in the questionnaire which were the Yes-No, multiple answers and Likert Scale. Sections A and B consisted of Yes-No and multiple answers questions where students were required to tick the appropriate answers. For Yes-No questions, students were to tick only one answer for each question. In contrast, for the multiple answers questions, students were allowed to tick more than one answer for each question. Meanwhile, in Section C, students were asked to rate their level of agreement to statement related to their motivations and attitudes to learn the English literature component based on a 4-point Likert scale; Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Strongly Agree (SA) and Agree (A).

### **RESPONDENTS OF THE STUDY**

The respondents of this study were sixty 16-year old Form Four female students from St. George's Girls' School in Penang. A total of sixty questionnaires were distributed to two classes. For the purpose of this research, the sample was selected based on convenience sampling as the researcher used the existing classes in the school system.

### **PILOT STUDY**

Before the actual data collection, the questionnaire was piloted to a group of five Form Four students who were chosen at random to assess the clarity of the items in the research instrument. The respondents of the pilot study were representative of the actual respondents of this study. After obtaining feedback from them, the researcher made some changes and improvements to the actual questionnaire to ensure clarity of the items in the questionnaire to be used for the actual study.

### **RESEARCH PROCEDURE**

Before conducting the study, approval was obtained from the Educational Planning Research Development (EPRD), *Jabatan Pelajaran Negeri Pulau Pinang* (JPNPP) and school authority. For the actual study, the questionnaires were distributed to 60 students in two Form Four classes during their free periods. Students were briefed on how to answer the questionnaire and were given 30 minutes to complete it. They had the chance to seek clarification from the researcher when they had problems understanding the items.

### **Data Analysis**

Table 1 illustrates students' attitude towards learning the English literature component. Overall, 68 percent of the students had favourable attitudes towards the English literature. This finding is deduced by analysing the statements. Students with positive attitudes towards the English literature showed their enthusiasm to learn and participate in the literature lessons as well as were willing to take necessary actions to ensure their success in learning English literature. This is consistent with the study conducted by Liu (2007) who found that the more positive attitude and the higher integrative and instrumental orientations the students had, the more proficient in English the students were.

From the table, 85 percent of the students showed that they loved learning literature in lively classrooms. This substantiates the fact that the students liked the literature lessons when their teachers provide interesting and fun activities in the classrooms (refer Figure 4.3.1 and Table 4.3.2). 83 percent of the students showed their enthusiasm, responsibility and passion towards literature by always completing and submitting their homework on time. This might be because they want to avoid punishment from their teachers as well ensuring their success in English subject. Thus, not only that this proves the students had positive attitudes towards literature, it also shows that the students possessed extrinsic motivations for learning literature because they did it for external factors; in this case to avoid punishment from their teachers.

Table 1: Students' Attitudes towards Learning the English Literature Component

No.	Statement	Frequency (%)	
		Disagree	Agree
19	Students like reading the literature component	15 (25%)	45 (75%)
20	Students like learning the literature component	11 (18%)	49 (82%)
41	Students show enthusiasm towards literature	23 (38%)	37 (62%)
42	Students able to solve own problems in literature	28 (47%)	32 (53%)
43	Students participate actively during lessons	25 (41%)	35 (59%)
44	Students are well-equipped to learn literature	27 (45%)	33 (55%)
47	Students love to learn in a lively classrooms	9 (15%)	51 (85%)
48	Students always complete their homework on literature and submit it on time	10 (17%)	50 (83%)
52	Students' background knowledge and additional materials to assist their learning	15 (25%)	45 (75%)
55	Students' ability to apply various techniques and methods while learning literature	28 (47%)	32 (53%)
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>191 (32%)</b>	<b>409 (68%)</b>

Two interesting findings that should be noted are statements 19 and 20. Although both statements are high in percentages (75 percent and 82 percent), it is important to realize that students had more favourable attitudes towards learning rather than reading the literature

component. This might be because they are not able to understand the texts fully when they read it on their own because of the linguistic and cultural barriers that exist between the students' knowledge and the texts. However, when teachers explained the texts in class, students were able to understand more about the texts, hence making them felt satisfied as they can finally comprehend the texts.

These findings are followed by 75 percent of the students who possessed background knowledge and additional materials to assist their learning in literature, 62 percent showed enthusiasm towards literature, 59 percent participated actively during lessons, 55 percent were well-equipped to learn literature and 53 percent were able to solve their own problems in learning literature as and apply various techniques while learning literature.

The fact that the students bought additional materials to gain knowledge and to learn more about the literature component rather than solely relying on their textbook confirms that they possessed quite favourable attitudes towards literature. This is because by learning literature, students are exposed to language culture of the texts and students' attitude towards it is the most important variable influencing foreign language acquisition (Chambers' 1999).

Nevertheless, even though the students showed their enthusiasm towards literature, the number of students who participated actively in classrooms was low. This is probably because of there is lacked enjoyable activities while learning literature that demotivated students from taking part. Similarly, only 50 percent of the students reported that they were able to apply various techniques while learning literature, were well-equipped to learn literature and were able to solve their problems in literature. This might due to the linguistic, cultural and historical barriers that the students face when reading the texts (Anita, 2001).

## Discussion

The overall findings in Table 1 show that the students possessed quite favourable attitudes towards learning the English component. This proves that the students have positive cognitive and affective aspects that relates to their thoughts, feelings and emotions towards literature (Gardner and Lambert, 1972). This might be because the students' main intention of learning literature is for their language development and through literature, they acquire the language subconsciously through extensive reading and gain familiarity with many features of the written language (Gray, 2000). This allows students to learn English easily and thus, realizing that English is not a burden for them.

Essentially, it should be noted that the students were enthusiastic to learn literature in lively classrooms with interesting and fun activities provided by their teachers. This is substantiated through as 34 percent of the students prefer learning literature by doing group works. Working in small groups enable students to learn from one another through meaningful interaction and sharing of ideas. Thus, it would create a fun, enjoyable and lively atmosphere in the classrooms. When the students enjoy themselves, they might find the literature component interesting and easy, hence engaging them to actively participate during lessons.

In this context, *sharing of ideas* means that the students talk about their views and opinions about the text on creative thinking aspects and are based on how readers' interpret the texts. This means that the students can interpret the texts freely and make meaning of the texts the way they want it. For instance, students express their opinions on what they would do if they were in the place of a certain character in a particular story. This is related to the Personal Growth Model as it uses learners' own experience to interact with the texts. As there is no right or wrong answer, the students are free to express their ideas and are more likely to share it with

their friends. This finding could also be related to the students' preference to learn in small groups during lesson. Apart from that, students might feel more comfortable to share ideas with each other rather than with their teachers as they are of similar age and share almost similar way of thinking.

Meanwhile, *discussing* in this context means that the students talk about the factual aspects of texts such as its' literary elements (metaphor, foreshadow, hyperbole, irony, etc.) structures, rhythms, types of texts and so forth. Since these elements are factual, it might be quite difficult for the students who do not have any literary background to discuss about these elements. Thus, students prefer to discuss the literary elements with their teachers rather than friends. Apart from that, the students probably discuss their problems in literature with their teachers when they are not able to solve it with their friends due to the linguistic and cultural barriers. Therefore, teachers are their resort to solve problems they face in learning the English literature component.

In conclusion, the findings show that the students possess favourable reactions and positive attitudes towards learning the English literature which they believed assisted their English language acquisitions. Apart from that, their attitude towards literature is also governed by the external factors (teachers, peer and additional materials) as well as the activities and techniques use in the classrooms. As attitudes can be modified by experience, more effective teaching strategies can encourage students' positive attitudes towards the English language (Elyildirim and Ashton, 2006).

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